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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to evaluate television commercials based on their reading (or print) content. Commercials aired on the three major networks during Saturday morning programing were viewed for six consecutive weeks. Each commercial was analyzed to determine how it used printed words to sell a product. The results revealed that the printed word was virtually nonexistent in commercials aimed at children. (FL)

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Do Television Commercials Offered During Children's Viewing Hours Require Any Reading Skills?

by

Karen J. Hart

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Submitted in partial fulfullment of the requirement
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the facts, it is obvious that children's viewing of television needs to be monitored. Time limits should be set for television viewing. Products should not be bought for the fanciest advertising or the prize in the box. Children should be made aware of nutritional values in advertised foods as well. With serious thought, all of the disadvantages of television could be overcome and television could be a valuable part of our lives.

characters found in commercials. Interestingly enough, children were found to be alone in toy commercials, however, children were usually with adults in food ads.

In this study, two techniques were found to be used frequently. The first was the use of jingles or slogans. They found that more than two-fifths of the commercials used jingles or slogans to sell their product. The second widely used technique was the use of repetition. The average number of repetitions was 3.82 for toy ads and 3.53 for food ads.

All of the researchers agree that ninety-eight percent of the homes in this country have a television set and that the average child spends thirty hours a week watching television. Considering these facts, educators have begun to show concern for attitudes and habits which have developed in this television oriented society. Susan Patridge (1978) felt that educators should use television to their advantage. She suggested developing lessons on nutrition from food commercials. She also suggested using television programs developed from books to get students reading those books. In general, it was necessary to use television in positive ways. Nancy Larrick looked to parents to monitor children's viewing habits. She also suggested that parents view Saturday morning television and note the commercial interruptions. Parents could then analyze commercials themselves and find the network most appropriate for their children.

The responsibility for children's television habits lies with parents as well as teachers. In becoming aware of

"partial assembly required" and found that young children did not know what it meant. Children expected the product to come fully assembled. In a second study using the same disclaimer, the researchers wanted to see the results using modified language. The modified disclaimer, "you have to put it together," was understood much better. As a result of these studies, it was concluded that children's requests for particular products would omit disclaimer information. Children were actually being mislead by disclaimers which they could not understand.

There have been several studies done on the actual content of commercials. Barcus analyzed 311 commercials from Saturday morning programming and found cereals, toys and foods and snack commercials occurred in the highest frequency. In another study done by Winick, Williamson, Chuzmir, and Winick, food ads were analyzed for their content. Animation was used in half the ads, slogans were found in two-fifths of the commercials and the product was related to fun in two-fifths of the commercials. Atkin and Heald (1972) completed a study on Saturday morning advertisements during the Christmas season. They found most commercials to be thirty seconds long, however, there were fifteen second and sixty second commercials as well.

Atkin and Heald found that the largest number of commercials were toy commercials. Food commercials were found in a high percentage with cereals making up the largest portion of that group. Their study also included an analysis of

minutes. The commercials are designed to capture the child's attention and sell the product with little regard to educational development.

Nancy Larrick has found that the same commercials are being designed for use throughout the world. In doing this, the English words had to be omitted and in general, a great deal of action replaced words. If this is an indication of what is to come, we may find words being used as little as possible in future commercials.

Robertson and Rossiter completed a study on children's responsiveness to commercials. Their study revolved around children's requests for advertised items. They found that the younger children who had high television exposure were more easily persuaded by commercials than older children with the same exposure. In researching effects of peers, it was found that level of peer integration did have an effect on commercial persuasion. In the last part of their study, they found that parental education had an effect on television exposure as well as commercial persuasion. Children with high television exposure with parents of low education were most easily persuaded by television advertising.

Language used in television commercials was the subject of research done by Liebert, Sprafkin, Liebert and Rubinstein. (1977) They found that children did not understand disclaimers such as; "partial assembly required," "batteries not included," and "clothes and accessories sold separately." In their study, they took the disclaimer

established by Michael McAndrew which used television scripts to teach reading. The program was designed to teach reading from grades three to twelve. Through the use of actual program scripts, students became aware of the printed word used to develop the show. Students were highly interested in playing the roles of their favorite television heroes. According to Michael Szabo's study of students involved in this program, all students showed a ten percent improvement in reading when television scripts were used as a supplement to their basic reading program.

In considering the amount of time spent in front of the television set, it becomes important to analyze commercials as well as programming. According to Nancy Larrick, the United States is one of only three countries allowing advertising on children's programming. The National Association of Broadcasters has a code which limits commercial time to twelve minutes per hour during children's weekend television. It has been noted that only sixty percent of broadcasters follow this code.

The constant interruptions can affect children in many ways. Attention spans are very short for children of this television age. They barely have a chance to get into a program and they are cut off for a commercial. This has to have an adverse effect on a child who is developing thinking skills. There is no limit on the amount of products which can be advertised within a commercial cluster, which means that there may be as many as five or six commercial segments within a few

Television has come to hold great influence over children today. Much of their lives revolve around what is happening in their favorite television programs. We, as educators, must recognize the implications of such intense television viewing and deal with them. Many problems can be attributed to television. Nancy Larrick, in describing teachers' reports of television readers, found that they had short attention spans, listening skills were undeveloped, they could not express themselves orally, reading was a chore to them, creative writing was poor, all of their reading interest revolved around television programs, and they frequently would answer a question with a question. There is little research available to back up these teacher observations. In considering all of the factors involved, actual research would be a difficult task.

The most serious problem in this age of TV, is the need for instant gratification. On television, a major problem can be solved within an hour time limit. A child who cannot separate the television world from reality, expects all problems encountered to be as quickly solved. In relation to reading, a child does not want to take the time to read for answers or think.

Educators have come to the realization that television is going to be a part of their students' lives and that it must be dealt with. Pam Proctor reported on a program

with Crayola; and "Follow my nose, it always knows," for Fruit Loops are several samples of phrases which would lend themselves well to vocabulary lessons.

In another aspect, certain commercials lend themselves to lessons involving figurative language. It is necessary for children to be aware of figurative language and to be able to discriminate between figurative and literal language. In this study, the advertisement for Nestle's Crunch, "hum a few bars of Nestle's Crunch," would illustrate such language.

Hero figures and familiar characters always lend themselves to classroom activities. Children tend to identify with these characters. A language experience story could revolve around such a character.

Although these are good advertising techniques, their effect on children is questionable. It becomes necessary to consider educating children to be aware of how they are manipulated by the advertising media. Although many educators tend to ignore television in daily lessons, it is very much a part of the children's lives. With the realization that television commercials do not require reading skills, it is time that educators recognize the potential problems that could result and make honest efforts to use these commercials in positive ways.

Another problem in commercial advertising is the use of names which are very close to real words but are spelled slightly different in order to obtain patents. Examples of such products include: Alphabits, Marshal Mallow, and Waffelos. Cap'n Crunch makes use of an abbreviation for captain which may not be recognized as such. These product names could have an adverse effect on children's vocabulary if in fact they are more familiar with the products than the real words. An educator could teach children to recognize these inconsistencies.

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study show that reading skills are not required in television commercials aimed at children. However, in consideration of the hours spent watching television, it is possible for teachers to use commercials to their advantage within a reading program. It is important that children be taught to look beyond the flashy colors and snappy jingles. With direction, children would be able to recognize various techniques used to get them to purchase products. In consideration of these results, it would appear necessary to educate children to look beyond the commercial message to the quality of these products. It would be in that aspect that reading could be used to critically evaluate various products.

Snappy jingles could be used very effectively within a vocabulary lesson. Teachers could use these jingles to their advantage and develop lessons based on words used in the jingles. Lucky Charms are "magically delicious"; It is fun to create

Table II cont.

Technique	Product
Demonstration of product by children	Crayola Pizzo's/ Cheeso's/ Beefo's Cocoa Krispies Alphabits Bubble Yum Waffelos Underoos Honeycomb Marshal Mallow McDonald's Burger King Hershey's Syrup Watchamacallit Lucky Charms Hubba Bubba Rolo Nestle's Quik Reese's Candy Tang Aim Toothpaste

In educating children with respect to advertising, it seems important that they be directed to "look" beyond the commercial message, to view commercials critically. An analysis of commercial propaganda or selling by associative techniques reveals examples for teachers' use. One example of such methods is that involved in a cereal commercial in which a child is seen attempting to ride a bicycle up a hill and having difficulty in getting to the top. Upon eating the product the child was able to ride over the hill and beyond. Children are lead to believe that by eating the product they will have exceptional strength. Teacher emphasis in instruction could very well be a determination of whether the message is true, partially true, or completely false.

or familiar character lures the child to the product.

Table II

Techniques Used in Selling Products

Technique	Product
Jingles/ Slogans	Honeycomb
	Burger King
	Honey and Nut Corn Flakes
	Bubble Yum Bubble Gum
	Cap'n Crunch Cereal
	Apple Jacks
	Lucky Charms
	Pizzo's/ Beefo's/ Cheeso's
	Sugar Smacks
	Nestle's Quik
	Nestle's Crunch
	Crayola Crayons
	Underoos
	Fruit Loops
	Rolo
	Hershey Candy
	Tang
	Hubba Bubba Bubble Gum
	Frosted Mini Wheats
	Reese's Candy
Special Offers	Kellogg's Cereals
	Post Cereals
	Burger King
	Cap'n Crunch
	Fruity/ Cocoa Pebbles
Hero Figures/ Familiar Characters	McDonals's
	Burger King
	Cap'n Crunch
	Aim Toothpaste
	Fruity/ Cocoa Pebbles
	Nestle's Quik
	Kellogg's Frosted Flakes
	Alphabits
	Hershey Syrup

Table I cont.

Product	Times Shown*
Pizzo's/ Beefo's/ Cheeso's	2
Reese's Peanut Butter Cups	2
See Wee and Baby	2
Underoos	3
Waffelos Cereal	4
Watchamacallit	2

*Times shown include only commercials shown more than once.

Table II illustrates the various techniques which are employed to sell products to children. The table includes the following techniques: jingles/ slogans; special offers; hero figures/ familiar characters; and demonstration of the products by children. The use of jingles and slogans played an important role in those commercials included in this sampling. The extensive use of jingles and slogans suggest that they are a successful method of advertising. The combination of repetition and jingles apparently implants the commercial message in the minds of the viewers. Within this process, it is important to note, that the jingles are composed of words and as the jingle is committed to memory, so are the words. This suggests that the extensive use of jingles may be contributing, in their own way, to young children's vocabulary.

Another widely used technique is the use of children demonstrating the product. Children are coerced into using a product when they see other children using it so enthusiastically. In like manner, the practice of using a hero figure

main character referred to a book for information. Most of the emphasis was in keeping with an upbeat and entertaining nature.

Table I illustrates the frequency of commercials over a three hour time period. Repetition was one factor which advertisers did not ignore. New products such as Marshal Mallow and Waffelos were shown in high frequencey in order to reinforce their message on their viewers. It should also be noted that the majority of commercials aimed at children were for highly sweetened cereals, candy, and fast foods, while there was only one toothpaste commercial seen within six weeks.

Table I

Frequency of Commercials Within a Three Hour Period on Saturday Mornings from 1/3/81 to 2/7/81

Product	Times Shown*
Aim Toothpaste	3
Alphabits	2
Aristocats	3
Bubble Yum Bubble Gum	3
Burger King	3
Cap'n Crunch	3
Cocoa Pebbles	2
Cookie Crisp Cereal	2
Frosted Lucky Charms	2
Fruit Loops	2
Honeycomb	2
Hubba Bubba Bubble Gum	3
Keebler Fudge Cookies	4
Kellogg's Frosted Flakes	2
Marshal Mallow	3
McDonald's	4
Nestle's Crunch Bar	2
Nestle's Quik	2

of children in the demonstration of a product.

Results

In the commercials which were seen, the use of printed words were almost completely avoided. Those commercials which advertised cereal always included a message about the vitamin content in print. An example of such a commercial would be Honeycombs which flashed "fortified with ten essential vitamins" across the screen at the end of the commercial. Along with the information about vitamin content, all of the cereal commercials included a statement that their product was, "part of a complete breakfast." Another commercial which used printed words, in a minor role, was a Burger King commercial advertising an artist's set. The printed words were referring to the assembly of the set and read, "You have to put it together." Alphabits was the only commercial which used printed words in the actual demonstration of the product. In that commercial, the words, "Tommy Help Us," were spelled out in the boy's cereal bowl as he went to the rescue.

Having determined that the printed word was virtually non-existent in children's commercials, it was necessary to look into other aspects of the commercial messages as they related to reading skills. Commercials were reviewed for any positive reference to reading. It was noted that there were only two commercials in which the character was shown reading. These commercials included Burger King, "School's Got a Brand New Twist," and Fruity and Cocoa Pebbles in which the

aimed at children based on their frequency as well as content. In analyzing the content of the commercials, it was necessary to examine how printed words were used in order to sell products. In addition, commercials were further evaluated by comparing the visual message with the auditory message in the absence of the pictured or printed word stimulus.

Definitions

Reading Skills are defined as skills that children need to master in order to develop reading ability. These skills are classified under the major areas including; word recognition, word meaning, comprehension, study skills and appreciation.

Specific Procedures

Saturday morning programming was viewed for six consecutive weeks between January 3, 1981 and February 7, 1981. All commercials were viewed critically and tape recorded. The programming of the major networks, ABC, NBC and CBS, were used. Each network was viewed twice within the time period.

Each commercial was then noted for characteristics including, actual reading content, frequency within one morning, and techniques employed to sell various products. The various techniques used to sell products were broken down into the following categories: jingles and slogans; special offers; hero figures and familiar characters; and use

negative effects of television on reading attitudes and habits and found that there were ways in which educators could use television to motivate reading interest.

It would appear that television in itself is not requiring skills and that it is the responsibility of the educators to use television to their own advantage. Educators simply cannot ignore the impact that television has on children and the time has come to make use of it in positive ways rather than overlooking its effects.

Hypothesis

To provide research into the actual skills required by television commercials, a study was done to evaluate commercials based on reading content. It was hypothesized that television commercials which were aimed at children did not require reading skills.

Instructional Procedures and Sample

In order to collect a sampling which would be representative of commercials aimed at children, viewing took place on Saturday mornings for a three hour period between the hours of 9 A. M. and 12 P. M.. Only the major networks, NBC, CBS, and ABC were used. All commercials were tape recorded to aid the researcher in evaluations. Local ads and public service announcements were not used in the study due to their nature.

It was necessary to evaluate television commercials

The effects of television on children is a concern which is growing with the realization of the large number of hours the average child spends watching television. Educators have come to believe that since they cannot change the viewing habits, it is necessary to find ways to use television as an incentive for education. Pam Proctor (1980), reported on a program developed by Dr. Michael McAndrew called, "The Television Reading Program" (TVRP), which attempted to teach reading through the use of television scripts.

As the effects of television on children becomes an increasing concern, it becomes impossible to ignore the television commercials. Lewis Miller (1978) presented a paper on television's effect on children. He attempted to look at both the positive and negative aspects of the effects of television. He favored the positive effects and potentials of television.

Sometimes a question arises as we consider the effects of television commercials on reading. Can a medium which requires such passive participation contribute in a positive way to reading which requires active thinking? Television itself does not require any large amount of skills. In fact, it feeds children information requiring little more than the ability to see and hear. The child can essentially spend hours using nothing beyond his receptive skills, which are the lowest on the hierarchy of integrated skills. Susan Patridge's article examined the positive and